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The Session

by Kendall Driscoll

Looking back over the last week, help us understand how you have been feeling by rating how well you have been doing in the following areas of your life. How do you feel about your general sense of well-being? 0 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied)

Mira stared at the paper clamped down to the clipboard in her lap. The girl's paperwork only required her to complete fifteen general questions about how she was doing, but somehow there was still some uncertainty as to what an appropriate answer was. Rate yourself too high and you look like a complete liar. Rate yourself too low and you'll be committed to the psych ward of Rush University Medical Center.

Mira skipped the question and moved back the previous five she had neglected to answer. She hesitated once again, tapping the pen against the plastic clipboard. *Tap! Tap! Tap!* The teenager pulled her attention from questionnaire in her lap. Glancing up she found the rest of the people in the waiting room giving her "that look." The pen froze in mid-tap. "Sorry," she mouthed to those around her. The seventeen-year-old girl gave a quick side glance to her mother and found her to be completely oblivious about the pen tapping incident.

Like any mother who came into Dr. Alex Tobias' office, Ms. O'Connor was diligently filling out cannons of paperwork regarding medical history and confidentiality agreements. While mother and daughter had arrived to the office right on the dot for a 4 o'clock appointment, no one had warned them that paperwork would take at least fifteen minutes to fill out before the patient could walk through the threshold of the shrink's office.

Mira let out a deep sigh of relief. With her mom taking so long to fill out paperwork, she had ample time to figure out how to answer five more questions on this self-rating inventory. In the back of the girl's mind, she knew that the longer this tedious work took, the shorter the counseling session would be today. The shorter she could make these sessions the better. The last thing she wanted was a crazy shrink digging into her mind.

She didn't really want to be here on a Wednesday afternoon. Giving up robotics team for a psych appointment was a sacrifice that was almost unforgivable in her mind, but she wouldn't disobey her parents' marching orders. Mira would adamantly deny that she had problems, but her parents knew she needed some kind of help. When Brian O'Connor—aka psychologist, licensed thera-

pist, and father—noticed that his daughter needed guidance beyond his scope, he called up a fellow colleague from the area and asked to set up an appointment.

This seemed like complete betrayal to Mira. Her father wasn't even the one to take her to the counseling appointment. Ms. O'Connor was the one who took off from work to bring Mira to her appointment. At the moment, Mira felt nothing but resentment toward her father for selling her out to be a mental problem that he couldn't handle.

Do you ever think about harming yourself? Not at all, somewhat, moderately, a lot, or extremely.

The girl thought to herself quietly. *Somewhat*. As she began to circle her answer, a twinging pain radiated from the tip of her index finger. The pain was an annoying reminder of what she did to cope. For now, she had an inconspicuous flesh-colored Band-Aid wrapped around the mutilated skin on her finger. For as long as she could, she would keep her finger-picking a secret. But then how long could it stay a secret when your fingers were consistently wrapped each week you showed up to an appointment? And then there were the blade cuts along the insides of her arms. At least now that winter was coming, she would blend in with everyone wearing long sleeved shirts. This would be a guise that she'd have to hold onto for as long as she could.

Do you have suicidal thoughts?

Somewhat. Who doesn't ever think about it? Mira thought to herself. Any thinking person alive imagined the consequences of suicide. That didn't mean that everyone was suicidal though.

Would you like to end your life?

Not at all.

This was the first question the girl hadn't hesitated answering. She knew that this question was a sure trap—one that would guarantee hospitalization. Any answer besides "never" would have yielded a certain diagnosis of depression and a prolonged plan of treatment. For Mira, that was the path she wanted to avoid at all costs.

Three more questions to go, Mira thought to herself. *Two more about my mood this week and one about my overall well-being. Back to the stupid rating scale.*

How do you feel about your close relationships and friendships?

9. Mira was content with her friends at school and she didn't mind her mother. Right now her beef was with the traitor who was related to her by blood. For the purposes of this inventory, she would say she was content even if she wasn't fully content.

What do you feel about the main concern that brought you here?

4. This was a pretty honest answer. The week so far had sucked. College applications had been open for two months now and were begging to be completed. The unit quiz in AP biology was miserable. Sleep had been a non-existent luxury because of said AP biology quiz. Plus Mira had to give up the robotics team until she no longer needed counseling services with Dr. Tobias. The sooner the sessions ended and she could be cleared, the sooner she could return to her cyborg team before the competition at the end of January.

How do you feel about your general sense of well-being?

What kind of question is this? Mira asked herself. The previous questions should have been a good enough indication of her well-being, so why ask about one's "overall well-being?" Also why put this question on a self-inventory? How truthful and unbiased could a person be answering this kind of question? For Mira, there was no good way to answer the question.

Mira paused in deep thought. *4 and 9 were the answers to the previous questions. How about just take the average and round up? So... 7.*

Looking up from her paper with contentment, she surveyed the waiting room and she now began the wait until she was called. "Finished?" Ms. O'Connor said brightly to her daughter. Mira nodded. Her mother had already finished her paperwork and had been waiting for Mira to finish. With a sort of grace, Ms. O'Connor rose from her seat and crossed the waiting room to deliver the forms back to the receptionist. She lingered at the desk for a few moments. She passed a few words to the woman at the desk before returning to chair beside Mira.

"We good now?" Mira asked.

"Yep," Ms. O'Connor answered. She reached into her bag for her Kindle device. "She said that Dr. Tobias will be with you shortly. Just reviewing a few things before you two get started."

"Wait, aren't you coming in for the first part of the session?" Mira was caught off-guard. Since her father was a licensed counselor, she knew well that parents usually expressed their concerns to the therapist before the initial session began.

"No. Your father already chatted with Dr. Tobias over the phone.

"Great," Mira said with deep sarcasm. "I'm glad to hear that they are both buddy-buddy." Her mother smiled gently and began to read. She knew it was next to impossible change her daughter's frame of mind when she got like this.

Dr. Alex Tobias. This man is probably just as crazy as my own father, Mira

thought to herself. In her mind, she imagined an old balding man with large framed glasses. She could definitely see him as a connoisseur of fine cigars. Mira's eyes wandered about the waiting room finally resting on a magazine stand with subscriptions ranging from the standard *Seventeen* magazine to *Sport Illustrated* and then to the unstandardized *Opera Now*. *This man must have a wide range of interests to occupy his time.*

"Mira O'Connor?" a woman called from a doorway in the back of the waiting room. The auburn-haired teenager stood and crossed room to the open doorway. The woman led her down a small hallway to an open office with a brass plate on the door which read "Dr. Alexandra C. Tobias, Ph. D." As the girl walked in, a pale-haired woman seated at a desk turned to face her. "Good afternoon, Mira! I'm Dr. Alex Tobias. It's a pleasure to meet you." In a swift motion, she stood and extended her hand.

Ah, Dr. Alexandra Tobias. The woman had to have been in her early thirties. Mira was caught off guard. The girl hesitantly moved forward to receive the doctor's handshake. "It's nice to meet you, too," Mira answered just as she had been taught to answer for college interviews. The two shook and then stood there for a moment awkwardly.

"Come on in and I'll close the door. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable."

There was a choice of three chairs placed within the room. One straight-backed chair by the doorway and two puffy lounge-like chairs opposite the woman's desk. Together, the three chairs made an awkward obtuse triangle. Somehow, the choice of chair seemed like the first test that her new therapist was administering to her. Finally, the girl settled into the one of marshmallow chairs further away from her desk. Following suit, the psychologist took her place in chair mirroring Mira's.

"Your father has told me all about you," the woman began.

"Oh great," Mira said unenthusiastically. She tucked her arms comfortably across her chest. There was no telling what insanity her father had already revealed this woman.

"Don't worry. We only talked briefly over the phone." She paused and reached over to her desk for her clipboard and pen. It had three papers attached to it. From what Mira saw, she knew that the form she had filled out in the waiting room was on top. "So tell me, what brings you here today?"

"Well... my mom obviously." The girl smiled sheepishly. Though she would never admit it to Dr. Tobias, Mira's stomach rolled with nerves. "Stress?"

Mira offered in the form of a question rather than an answer.

"I see." Dr. Tobias flipped the front page over the clipboard and began jotting down some notes on the second page. The sound of her pen scratching across the paper only made Mira's heart jump even more. She hated this appointment already. The more the woman talked, the more it reminded Mira of her father's approach to solving problems, talking them out. "Tell me more."

"School is intense at times. It's a real challenge."

"Your dad says you're a straight A student."

"I mean—yeah, I do well in my classes, but that doesn't come without hard work."

"Of course. Tell me what classes you're taking. Are you doing any clubs this year?"

"Plenty." *And I'm missing robotics club because of this*, Mira thought to herself. "I'm taking a pretty heavy load of classes. As a senior, I picked challenging classes that will look good on transcripts that'll be sent to colleges."

"Smart choice. What colleges are you thinking about applying to?"

"Vanderbilt, Tufts, Duke, Columbia..."

"That's an impressive list! Have an idea of a major?"

"Biology with a pre-med track. I'm going to med school after undergrad. I'm working to be a surgical orthopedist," Mira answered with confidence. Since sophomore year, she had her answer rehearsed and scripted. For her, direction, focus, and meticulous planning were prized; without them, there was no future. To attain that future, all she needed to do was go through the mechanical motions of completing task after task.

"Sounds like you know exactly what you want to do, but does the future ever frighten you?" Dr. Tobias asked.

"I guess—but if you think about it, the future scares everyone."

For a moment, Dr. Tobias saw a glimpse of something within the girl. Ever so slightly as Mira modestly admitted, the girl's aura turned inward. Her eyes shifted downward. For only a second, the girl's fire withered at the revelation of vulnerability. But as soon as her guard went down, it snapped back up. The therapist jotted down something in her notebook: *Successful kid. In denial that she has a problem. Heavily guarded. Trouble opening up.*

"So things are stressful at school... are things stressful at home? How is your relationship with your parents?"

"Mom's great. She's a chemistry professor at a university. We're close. Sorta."

“And how about your dad?” Dr. Tobias noticed Mira’s deliberate avoidance about talking about her father.

“He’s okay, I guess. You already know he’s a licensed psychologist. I mean, you guys kinda work with one another.” The girl grimaced.

“We sometimes refer our patients to one another for second opinions, but we don’t necessarily work together,” Dr. Tobias answered. She paused in thought. “Tell me a little more about your relationship with your father.”

The red-haired girl shifted in her chair and allowed her weight to fall against the back of the chair. “Well, he’s clinical. Believe it or not, he has his own problems.”

“From my experience working with him, he seems very nice. Very gentle and calm.”

“It’s a defense mechanism,” Mira answered. The therapist cocked an eyebrow. “He may seem calm on the outside, but it’s all a façade.”

The unspoken keyword was “crazy shrink.” Dr. Tobias knew this phrase too well, so she could see where her patient was coming from. Therapists spent their lives listening to other people’s problems that sometimes they neglected to take care of their own problems. Sometimes it was just a matter of putting on a calm face for your patients. Nothing screamed unprofessional more than a therapist venting her problems to a patient.

“What bothers you about your father?” the doctor asked.

“He’s been acting as though there’s something wrong with me. He thinks I need help and I don’t. There’s nothing wrong with me.” Dr. Tobias made a mental note to herself. Denial.

“Perhaps he’s showing that he cares about you.”

“Or that he wants to diagnose me. That’s why he sent me here. I shouldn’t be here. I have other things I need to do.”

“Like?”

“Homework, reading, applications, and more homework,” Mira rattled off. “There’s a lot to worry about as a senior.”

“I have no doubt, but have you ever considered that worrying does you no good?” Dr. Tobias posed.

“It reminds me of everything I need to do in a timely manner,” Mira shot back.

“But worrying overwhelms you. Does it not?” Silence. “How much time do you spend on yourself daily?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do spend any time doing things specifically for yourself? Like doing things for pleasure. Hanging out with friends. Reading a book for fun.”

“Not much.”

“Well for the next week, I want you to take a little time for yourself and do something enjoyable. It’s alright to be selfish sometimes.”

“I don’t have time for that.”

“Maybe ten minutes a day.”

“That’s ten minutes I could be doing—“

“Mira,” Dr. Tobias said firmly. She didn’t mean to cut her off but she was beginning to show her frustration with this girl. “You’re a successful young woman. Your academics are wonderful according to your dad. He brags your hardworking mentality. I appreciate how hard you work, but you need to first and foremost take care of yourself.”

“Okay,” the girl huffed as she re-crossed her arms over her chest. She averted her gaze away from the woman who was speaking to her.

This is going to be a rough session today, Dr. Tobias thought to herself.